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How Florida's Native Americans Predicted and Survived Hurricanes

Betty Osceola, a member of the Miccosukee tribe and Panther clan, shared several stories about her family's own experiences dealing with hurricanes and tornadoes in South Florida

By Michael Sainato



Osceola drove the point that Native Americans' experiences and responses to hurricanes and other natural disasters stem from a deep connection and reverence for nature, one that is severely lacking in modern society. She wrote, "Our ancestors the Seminole and Miccosukee were taught not to fear the Hurricane. The generations of our people today need to remember and to share the stories with our younger generations so they too will respect and love the natural world."

In the 1700's, American colonists had [displaced](#) Native American tribes from their homeland in northern Florida, and southern Georgia, pushing the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes to South Florida. The Seminole Wars raged on in the 1800's as they fought back against President Andrew Jackson's genocidal efforts to relocate Native Americans to territory west of the Mississippi River, and Native Americans ultimately sought refuge in the swamps of South Florida to avoid being attacked by white Americans. Living in Florida, the native Americans developed the knowledge and foresight to anticipate hurricanes and protect themselves from them.

In the book, *The Great Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928*, William Nealy [noted](#) that sawgrass blooming tipped off Native Americans in Florida that a hurricane was coming; "they believed that only an atmospheric condition such as a major hurricane would cause the pollen to bloom on the sawgrass several days before a hurricane's arrival." Upon the sawgrass tipping off the Native Americans, they would leave the Everglades for ground inland and [use the palms](#) from Saw Palmetto plants to construct tunnels for shelter.

In response to Hurricane Irma, [Betty Osceola](#), a member of the Miccosukee tribe and Panther clan, [shared several stories](#) on Facebook regarding her family members' historical experiences with hurricanes and tornadoes in South Florida.

"Many years ago when my husband's late father was a young boy about 10 years old their family was out in the Everglades at a gathering on one of the tree islands," she wrote in one post. "The elders looked at the sky and knew a 'Big Wind' was coming. As time progressed it started getting windy. They had all traveled by dug out canoe and it was too late for them to travel elsewhere, so they were told they were going to stay in place. His father remembered the men dragging the canoes up on to the island and securing the gathering grounds. He remembered the chickee hut they were staying in, the men brought down the legs down so the roof landed on the ground. They crawled under the roof and huddled covered from the elements. They heard the winds howling and felt the winds as they passed thru the leaves of the roof. They could hear the trees crashing to the ground. He remembered them being worried one would fall on them. It was many hours before the hurricane passed. When the winds and rain finally passed they came out of their shelters. And for as far as they could see the land looked clear for the winds had flattened the landscape." She added that one man went out hunting and was caught in the hurricane, forced to take solace under his dug out canoe. "Before the storm he told them he couldn't find any